DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 431 EC 301 192

AUTHOR Steinke, Gary L.; Steinke, Roberta J.
TITLE Public Relations for Special Education.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted; *Institutional Advancement; Organizational Communication; Parent School Relationship; Publicity; *Public Relations; School Community Relationship; *Special Education

ABSTRACT

This paper offers suggestions to help special educators and administrators effectively and thoroughly tell people about their school's programs and events dealing with special education. General suggestions include appointing a public relations coordinator, having school personnel complete a Public Relations Help Request Form when publicizing events, and targeting particular audiences. Other suggestions concentrate on specific target groups, such as communications with school staff or colleagues, parents, and the community. Techniques for dealing with print and broadcast media are offered. Other media outlets, such as direct mail, billboards, and promotional items, are also noted. (12 references) (JDD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED345431

PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

Gary L. Steinke, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Department of Communications

The University of Tennessee at Martin

and

Roberta J. Steinke, M.A.

Speech-Language Pathologist

Weakley County Schools

Dresden, Tennessee

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gary L. Steinke

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EC 301192

BEST COPY AVAILABLE 2

PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

Everyone knows that they need to be constantly telling their communities about the special education programs in their schools. To do this, you need to learn the use of good public relations techniques. The term public relations means just that - relating information to the public via newspaper, radio, television, etc., so that people do know what is happening in special education. The following information will give you suggestions on how to effectively and thoroughly tell people about the programs and events dealing with special education at your school.

Getting Started

Appointing a public relations coordinator is a good first step when organizing a special education public relations program. This coordinator can be at a centralized location to handle information for the entire school system or he/she can be a designated person within each school. Regardless, there needs to be a consistent contact person collecting and organizing special education information. Next, when school personnel want a particular event or activity publicized in the community, have them submit a Public Relations Help Request form (see sample). This form encourages people to focus their thinking on what they want publicized and why they want an event promoted. By using this form, your public relations coordinator can follow special education activities and arrange to contact various local media sources.

Target Your Audience

When considering the development of a special education public relations plan for your school or department, your public relations coordinator needs to look at the groups of people you want to reach or

"target" with your information. Three important target groups to start with are staff or colleagues you see daily, parents of special education students, and people in the local community. Carefully look at these groups and answer the following questions for each group when sending them information.

First, what might interest each group about special education? Some items to consider might be: special events (such as Special Olympics), academic or other successes of specific students, classes or schools, or even the unique needs of certain students requiring wheelchairs, electronic communication devices, clothes, special shoes, etc. A second question to address is what is the prevalent education level of these people? Whether your target group is high school educated or are all college graduates, use the vocabulary each group will understand and simplify this vocabulary if you need to. Do not assume your target group knows what you know. Lastly, ask yourself where do I contact these people? Places and organizations to consider are churches, social or philanthropic organizations, employers in the community, and local civic groups. By analyzing the information needs of these three target groups, you are more clearly identifying what these groups of people might be interested in learning about special education.

Public Relations and Your Staff/Colleagues

Now that you have identified the information needs of your target groups, let's first concentrate on public relations communications with your staff or colleagues. A system-wide or school newsletter can be sent to this group periodically. Here are several ideas of what to include in your newsletter.

First, information can be listed about local special education activities. Second, special education regulations and the referral process might be discussed. Third, special education terminology can be defined and explained for readers. And fourth, the accomplishments of specific special education personnel and their students should be highlighted in the newsletter.

Another good public relations activity is to have your name regularly placed on your faculty meeting agenda. At these meetings, be sure to tell specific, positive examples of special education successes. Also, stress the value of having the support and help of your staff and colleagues.

An additional way to promote good public relations is to pick a "star" student from the classes of different staff members. This student can be chosen monthly or every grading period. Have the classroom teacher of this student also be included in any special education bulletin boards, newspaper photographs, etc., which highlight the successes of this student. What you are doing is reminding people that staff or colleagues who work with special education students are critical and important members of the educational team.

If you are looking for a quick way to contact staff or colleagues, you can develop special education "blips" (see sample). Using half sheets of colored paper to draw attention to your "blip," list short "Did you know?" information facts about your school and special education program; you can also include general information about specific disabilities, educational problems, etc., and place it in the mailboxes of all school personnel. By using these public relations techniques to reach and inform

your staff or colleagues, you can let them know how special education is an integral part of the school.

Public Relations and Parents

Public relations with parents must also be carefully and consistently organized. Regularly send home with your students, at periods other than report card time, an "I Care" note. These are notes which say "I Care" at the top. Along with the name of the student, a short, positive message should be included about work or behavior goals which are improving. You certainly get the attention of a parent when a note tells good news about their child.

In addition to writing notes, you can also contact parents by telephone. When you call them, be sure to tell them about the progress their child is making in class and thank them for their support of special education goals. The ultimate purpose of the telephone call is to tell them on a regular basis that you care about their child.

A third activity you can pursue to practice good public relations with parents is to develop a student badge which tells parents, when students wear the badges home, that their child did well in math, reading, speech, etc., that day. These badges can be books (to represent reading) which say "Mr./Ms. _____ heard good reading from (child's name) today!". Or they can also be animals, smiles, etc., with similar short, positive statements about work done well (see sample). The parent can see what you think of the work their child is doing by the kind of badge you send home. By often telling parents what their child is doing successfully in special education, you are establishing rapport with

parents who need to be able to work comfortably with all special education personnel for possibly the entire time their child attends public schools.

Public Relations and the Community

In order to contact your third target group, the community, you will need to create publicity material for the mass media (i.e., newspapers, radio, television stations, and cable television outlets). Producing quality publicity information on a regular basis takes time and effort. However, the mass media coverage your special education program receives is well worth the energy spent creating publicity material. Here are some ways to help you develop quality publicity material for your local media.

Newspapers and the Print Media

Each of the mass media have different rules that must be followed when creating publicity material. For newspapers and the print media, be sure to consider these five basic points when writing publicity releases.

1. The lead sentence is the most important part of your publicity release. Make it direct and "eye catching" to get the editor's attention.

2. Always tell about local special education events including all of the six basics of a news story - who, what, where, when, why, and how. Double check your stories for clarity, completeness, and factual accuracy.

3. Try to send photographs which relate directly to your publicity release. Have your name and telephone number on the photographs and on the publicity release so that an editor or reporter can contact you for additional information.

4. Be sure to check your spelling and punctuation. Try to organize publicity releases using Associated Press (AP) or United Press

International (UPI) accepted news style. Newspaper style books can usually be obtained from your local newspaper upon request.

5. If your publicity release is limited for publication by a specific date, indicate when your information needs to appear in the local print media.

Broadcasting Media

When creating publicity material for the broadcast media, your public relations coordinator needs to consider an additional set of guidelines. Look at these six points when you want to publicize special education events using local broadcast media.

1. Try to have a conversational writing style that is written for the ear. Your listener or viewer can only hear your message once with no chance to review a sentence that has been spoken. Also, use sentence structure which is short, clear, and focused on a specific topic.

2. When you write material (or "copy" as broadcasters call it) for the broadcast media, make sure it can be easily read by the announcer. Long or poorly written publicity releases may never make it on the air.

3. Sights and sounds are important to broadcasters. Be sure the location where you release information to the broadcast media reflects the contents of your publicity release. For example, if a major special education event will occur at your school, have the broadcasters meet at the location of the event rather than in an empty office or hallway. Also, check for adequate power outlets, telephone lines, etc., to handle tape recorders, cameras, and lights.

4. Prepare fact sheets that contain the history and current status of the event you want covered by broadcasters. On the day of the event,

make sure radio and television reporters meet with a special education spokesperson who can answer questions and provide additional information about the special education activities you want publicized.

5. If you send local broadcasters an audio or video tape, be sure to label and identify the contents. By doing this, reporters do not have to spend their time sorting through your tapes. When you do produce your own audio or video tapes, keep a copy for yourself so that you have a tape recording of special education publicity events for later reference.

6. Be prepared for possible radio or television talk show appearances if your special education activity is a big community event. You will need to provide the interviewer (show host) with background material on the event well in advance of the date of the interview. Your special education spokesperson needs to plan what to say on all aspects of the event being discussed before appearing on the program.

Other Media Outlets

In addition to publicity material sent to the print and electronic media, there are some other ways you can convey special education information to the community. These alternative media outlets may be just the right way for you to publicize special education activities.

A good way to contact people in your community is through direct-mail letters to all households concerning special education programs. This can help increase community awareness of special education activities just before important events.

Another way to promote your special education program while simultaneously involving the local business community is through the use

of portable or fixed signs in front of stores. Most business people are happy to help promote special education events by listing the name of the activity, date, and time on their store sign.

The business community can also help publicize special education information by including material in their sale flyers that are mailed to customers or enclosed regularly in newspaper supplements. A small box in the corner of a newspaper flyer has the potential to reach many people who might otherwise not be aware of special education programs.

Outdoor advertising (billboards) can also be used to promote special education events. Find out from your area outdoor advertising company if there is some unsold advertising space that might be available at a reduced fee or free for a short period of time. For billboards it is important to remember to contact a company well in advance of when you need an activity publicized since art work has to be prepared for any outdoor advertising.

A final method you can employ to contact the community about special education is through the use of novelty promotional items that feature special education slogans or specific information about special events. These items can include pens, pencils, bumper stickers, hats, t-shirts, coffee cups, and various school items. At special education events, make sure you have plenty of these items available for people to take home with them. A person's daily use of a novelty item can act as a reminder of the importance of special education to your community. As with outdoor advertising, it is important to think ahead when you need these items so that the novelty manufacturer has time to produce a quality product for your use.

When striving to create good public relations in your school system or in a particular school, be sure that your public relations coordinator helps you identify the people you want to reach. By clearly targeting your staff or colleagues, parents, or the community, you will find it easier to promote special education activities. Also, through the use of public relations techniques, you will be able to more effectively reach and inform your community about the programs and events that make special education so "special" at your school.

REFERENCES

Brown, Kenneth L. Teaching, Speaking and Listening Skills in the Elementary and Secondary School. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Department of Education, 1981.

Cohen, Paula Marantz. A Public Relations Primer: Thinking and Writing in Context. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987.

Crable, Richard E. and Vibbert, Steven L. Public Relations as Communication Management. Edina, MN: Bellwether Press, 1986.

Cutlip, Scott M. and Center, Allen H. Effective Public Relations, 5th edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982.

Dunn, S. Watson. Public Relations: A Contemporary Approach. Homewood, IL: Irwin Press, 1986.

Mead, Nancy A. and Rubin, Donald L. "Assessing Listening and Speaking Skills." ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1985.

Newson, Doug and Carrell, Bob. Public Relations Writing Form and Style, 2nd edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1986.

Newson, Doug and Scott, Alan. This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations, 2nd edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1986.

Seitel, Fraser P. The Practice of Public Relations, 3rd edition. Columbus, OH: Merrill Publishing, 1987.

Speech Communication Association. Resources for Assessment in Communication. Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1984.

Van Hattum, Rolland J. Administration of Speech-Language Services in Schools: A Manual. San Diego, CA: College-Hill Press, 1985.

Van Hattum, Rolland J. Organization of Speech-Language Services in Schools: A Manual. San Diego, CA: College-Hill Press, 1985.